

From Hope To Humiliation: The Collapse Of Hegemonic Masculinity In The Life Of Omprakash Darji In A Fine Balance.

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Abstract

Representation of masculinity in postcolonial Indian literature may also embody the contradictions of social power, caste, and patriarchal norms. *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry is a novel that portrays a variety of male characters who find it difficult to cope with their identity in a socio-political environment defined by poverty, caste oppression, and the Emergency in India. This paper will analyze the traumatic experience of Omprakash Darji and examine how hegemonic masculinity falls apart in the face of structural violence and social marginalization. Through the use of R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and trauma theory from contemporary literary studies, this paper will argue that the life of Omprakash Darji illustrates how the patriarchal notion of power, masculinity, and social dominance is violently denied to subaltern males. Through caste oppression, economic exploitation, and the sterilization program during the Emergency, Omprakash's masculinity is systematically dismantled. This paper will also argue that the novel defies the cultural trope that masculinity is equivalent to power by showing how social institutions strip subaltern males of dignity, agency, and bodily integrity. The castration of Omprakash can be seen as a symbolic moment when the patriarchal notion of manhood is destroyed. In the end, Mistry's narrative reveals the weak ground on which hegemonic masculinity is constructed in a society divided by caste and violence. Conclusion. The trauma experienced by marginalized men in the novel reveals the paradox in patriarchy, which, in favoring masculinity, victimizes men who do not belong to powerful social groups.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Trauma, Caste Violence, Omprakash Darji, Postcolonial Literature, Indian Emergency, Marginalized Men

Date of Submission: 25-03-2026

Date of Acceptance: 05-04-2026

I. Introduction

Postcolonial Indian fiction often explores the interplay between caste, poverty, and gender. In this regard, '*A Fine Balance*' by Rohinton Mistry is a significant example of a survival story in the midst of political unrest during the Emergency period in India between 1975 and 1977. The novel revolves around four characters: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, whose lives converge in a city characterized by poverty and political instability.

Though the major criticism of the novel revolves around class inequality, caste oppression, and political violence, the theme of masculinity also plays a vital but lesser-criticized role in the novel. Masculinity in patriarchal societies like India is often linked to power, independence, and physicality. In '*A Fine Balance*', all these ideas of masculinity have been negated in the face of social injustice.

The theoretical background of hegemonic masculinity, as propounded by R. W. Connell, can also be used to analyze the theme of masculinity in the novel. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that legitimates male power and authority over others. This type of masculinity can only be attained by men who have access to social privileges like caste, class, and political power.

Omprakash Darji, one of the main characters in the novel, is a living example of this tragic paradox. Being born into the “untouchable” caste, Omprakash fights to make a decent life for himself as a tailor in the city. However, he is rendered the victim of violent caste attacks and political repression. His forced sterilization during the Emergency represents the annihilation of his masculinity and future.

This paper will explore how Omprakash’s story illustrates the trauma of marginalized masculinity. Through the analysis of the intersections of caste, power, and violence, this research will contend that *A Fine Balance* is a critique of the illusion of hegemonic masculinity in Indian society.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Marginalized Men

The idea of hegemonic masculinity was first coined by R.W. Connell, referring to dominant masculinity that justifies male authority in patriarchal societies. This includes masculinity that values male strength, economic power, and sexual and social dominance. It should be noted, however, that not all men share equally in patriarchal benefits; only those who have social privilege can practice hegemonic masculinity.

Men who belong to marginalized social groups, such as those from different castes, ethnic minorities, and economically disadvantaged social classes, may experience subordinate and marginalized masculinities. These are men who are not accorded access to privileges and benefits of masculinity that are associated with hegemonic masculinity and may suffer humiliation and social exclusion.

In the Indian setting, caste is one factor that significantly influences masculine identity. Men from upper castes have traditionally dominated positions of power, while men from lower castes have been denied dignity and social mobility. The lives of Ishvar and Omprakash, as depicted in ‘*A Fine Balance*’, show how caste dictates masculine identity.

In the life of Omprakash, for instance, we find how hegemonic masculinity is sustained by exclusion. While Omprakash desires economic independence and marriage—both being indicators of masculine identity—his caste status always thwarts his desires. We find in his life the contradiction in patriarchy, where masculinity is equated with power but is accompanied by feelings of powerlessness.

Caste Oppression and the Early Formation of Trauma

Omprakash’s trauma starts much before the Emergency. As a child, he sees the terrible effects of caste oppression in his village. His family is from the Chamar caste, which has always been compelled to do degrading work like leather tanning. But Omprakash’s father is adamant that his sons should not suffer this indignity and therefore trains them to become tailors.

This defiance of the caste system invites brutal attack from the Thakur, who belongs to the dominant caste. In one of the most chilling moments in the book, the members of Omprakash’s family are brutally tortured and roasted alive by the Thakur’s men. Ishvar and Omprakash are spared because they are not in the village at the time.

This traumatic event becomes the defining moment in Omprakash’s childhood. It illustrates how caste domination not only denies economic opportunities but also annihilates the lives of those who dare to resist. The massacre represents the violent subjugation of the social order. For Omprakash, the loss of his family becomes a significant psychological scar. The memory of violence informs his view of the world and his need to escape poverty. Simultaneously, he is reminded of his vulnerability in the social order.

Urban Migration and the Illusion of Masculine Independence

After the tragedy in their village, Ishvar and Omprakash migrate to the city in search of employment. Migration to the city signifies social mobility and freedom. For Omprakash, becoming a tailor in the city provides him with an opportunity to rebuild his identity and prove his masculinity.

In patriarchal societies, the capacity to make a living is often associated with masculinity. Work enables men to attain social status and to become breadwinners for their families. For Omprakash, therefore, becoming a tailor offers him a chance to attain dignity and maturity.

In the city, Omprakash faces new forms of exploitation. Living in a slum and in an unsteady environment, Omprakash faces the insecurity of poverty. Government “beautification” schemes result in the demolition of the slum where Omprakash lives. Omprakash thus becomes homeless and faces police harassment. In the novel, it is revealed that the residents of the shantytown are forcibly displaced due to urban development schemes (Britannica).

These incidents show the vulnerability of the male sense of independence in the poor. While Omprakash is working hard, his existence is still subject to the will of forces beyond his control. The hope of male independence turns out to be an illusion in a society divided by economic inequality.

The Emergency and State Control of Male Bodies

The political environment of the Emergency makes the oppression faced by marginalized groups even worse. During this time, the government had very aggressive population control measures, which included forced sterilization campaigns. These were mainly targeted at poor men who had no political backing.

Omprakash is one of the people affected by this campaign. When he goes back to his village in search of a wife, he encounters the Thakur who had previously ruined his family. The Thakur gets back at Omprakash by having him undergo forced sterilization.

What begins as a vasectomy operation turns into a mutilation process. Omprakash gets castrated, while Ishvar develops a medical condition that results in the amputation of both legs due to infection.

This is the final destruction of Omprakash's masculinity. In patriarchal society, the ability to reproduce is sometimes perceived as the most important factor that defines masculinity. The ability to produce offspring represents continuity and social status.

Through the forceful denial of this ability, the state and caste system deprive Omprakash of his autonomy and masculinity. Omprakash's trauma, therefore, is both physical and psychological. The violence that Omprakash suffers on his body represents the denial of dignity to marginalized men.

Castration as Symbolic Destruction of Masculinity

The symbolic significance of Omprakash's castration in the novel cannot be overlooked. It symbolizes not only the violence of the Emergency but also the ways in which society regulates marginalized bodies.

From the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, the male body is supposed to symbolize strength, masculinity, and power. Omprakash's castration is the direct opposite of this.

This is how hegemonic masculinity is practiced through exclusion. Men like Omprakash are denied the benefits of masculinity because of their caste and class. They do not get to experience the power of patriarchy but only its violence.

The inability to reproduce also eliminates Omprakash's aspirations for married life and family. Omprakash had previously aspired to married life and family. This was an aspiration to be involved in the social structures that defined manhood.

The inability to reproduce eliminates these aspirations. This makes the trauma not just physical but also eliminates his future.

Trauma, Despair, and Masculine Identity

Trauma in literature can also come from experiences that disrupt a character's identity and feelings of belonging. Omprakash's life can be seen as an example of how repeated trauma can disrupt the foundations of masculine identity.

The trauma of Omprakash comes from the massacre of his family, the hardships of living in poverty in the city, and the trauma of forced sterilization. All of these incidents have built upon Omprakash's feelings of marginalization and have reduced his capacity to exert power.

Unlike the ideal hegemonic masculine identity, Omprakash cannot exert power over the situations that he faces. Rather, he must learn to adapt to the situations that he faces. In this way, the novel disrupts the idea that masculinity inherently means power.

At the same time, Omprakash's capacity to endure trauma also points to the idea that humans have the capacity to endure trauma. Omprakash continues to live despite the trauma that he faces. He continues to live because of the support that he receives from Ishvar and Dina. Their friendship can also be seen as an alternative form of community that exists outside of patriarchal structures.

The Collapse of Masculine Hope

The latter part of the novel exposes the long-term effects of trauma. Maneck, returning to the city after a few years abroad, finds Ishvar and Omprakash reduced to beggars on the streets.

This is the effect of the loss of all their hopes and dreams. Ishvar and Omprakash, young men with hopes of economic freedom, are now living on the charity of others. The hope of achieving the dignity of masculinity is now a mere illusion.

The tragedy is further highlighted by the fact that Maneck, overcome by hopelessness, takes his own life after seeing the suffering of his friends. This highlights the bleak picture of reality presented by the novel and the psychological effects of injustice.

A Fine Balance thus shows how structural violence not only destroys lives but also the hope of living. Masculinity, which is offered by society as a symbol of power, is now a mere illusion for the marginalized.

II. Conclusion

The character of Omprakash Darji in Rohinton Mistry's '*A Fine Balance*' provides a scathing critique of hegemonic masculinity in postcolonial Indian society. According to the theory of hegemonic masculinity proposed by R. W. Connell, the novel reflects the influence of social structures like caste, class, and political power in the construction of masculinity. The life of Omprakash reflects the tragic fate that is bestowed upon masculinity in the face of these social structures. The castration scene may be seen as a moment in the novel in which the patriarchal notion of masculinity and power is defeated at its core. While reflecting the tragic fate of characters like Omprakash and Ishvar, Rohinton Mistry challenges the conventional notion that masculinity is linked to privilege. Instead, the novel reflects that masculinity and patriarchy are linked to power and vulnerability in terms of one's position in the social hierarchy.

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